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4 U.S. Radar Planes Being Sent to Europe To Bolster NATO

By John J. Fialka

Washington Star Staff Writer

In a move to help bolster the air defenses and the intelligence-gathering systems of NATO units, the United States is sending four Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft to West Germany.

While the Pentagon played down the move as being related to a series of routine exercises called "Creek Sentry," government officials indicated that it was a U.S. response to the increased tensions along Poland's borders.

The request for the AWACS came from U.S. allies during a NATO defense planning committee meeting in Brussels, the sources said. It was relayed to the United States through Gen. Bernard Rogers, supreme allied commander for Europe.

On Sept. 30 the United States responded to a similar request from Saudi Arabia, where four other AWACS are still on patrol duty along the Persian Gulf.

Pentagon spokesmen said that two of the aircraft, which the Air Force calls the E3A Sentry, are being sent to Ramstein Air Force Base in West Germany from Iceland. The other two will be dispatched non-stop from Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma with in-flight refueling along the way.

The move means that eight of the Air Force's fleet of 22 AWACS aircraft will be on patrol duty near world trouble spots. NATO does not yet have AWACS on permanent duty, although U.S. allies have ordered several of the sophisticated aircraft from the United States.

The AWACS can be used to close "gaps" in western air defense systems because they use powerful radars and computer systems to pinpoint and to target enemy aircraft for fighter planes and for ground-based air defense systems.

They can also provide an additional source of intelligence on Soviet air movements because an AWACS can see aircraft from a distance of 350 miles. They also can be used as airborne command posts in case of an enemy attack.

The Pentagon played down the dispatch of the four planes, noting that AWACS aircraft have routinely been deployed to Europe 11 times since November 1979 as part of a continuing series of exercises called "Creek Sentry."

The move came as Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and an entourage of other U.S. officials were attending a NATO meeting in Brussels. There, according to the Associated Press, Robert H. Falls of Canada, chief of the NATO military committee, told a news conference that Soviet units could move into Poland very quickly.

"Indeed I'm talking of hours, not days or certainly not weeks. They are in a state of readiness now that they could move in practically so that we would hear about it almost after the event."

Falls added that "there are all kinds of scenarios where you could imagine it could spill over into the concerns of the NATO countries and for that reason I don't think we could just go along business as usual."

Brown was scheduled to travel from Brussels to Korea and Japan later this week. Pentagon spokesmen said there were no changes in his travel plans.

Falls and other NATO officials disclosed that a fleet of destroyers and frigates on NATO duty in the Atlantic also would be kept on duty rather than sent to port for the Christmas holidays.